

Senate Education Committee hearing on Special Education in Texas

Public Testimony of Sheila Cunningham

6-16-2010

Main Points

- [REDACTED] entered PPCD at the age of 3 ½. He was diagnosed with PDD a short time later.
- With Mrs. Coronado & Miss Packard, [REDACTED] learned to better communicate and decreased the frequency of his tantrums. They used picture schedules, OT exercises and interaction with other children.
- Kindergarten through Fifth grade, Content Mastery Teacher Lonna Adams has been [REDACTED] advocate and our Special Needs lifeline. It has been a long road, but we have committed to partner with the school staff in helping our son be as successful as possible.

Handwriting took lots of time and cooperation between school and home

Reading comprehension is still a struggle, but Mrs. Adams volunteered to

Tutor [REDACTED] through the summer using a new curriculum

We teamed on making his IEP work

TAKS tests were a success despite failing two, because he learned how to get through and do his best

- Special Ed aides are essential ; Andreana, Candy, Tina, Norma
- Not all parents see it the way we do. For some, the teachers can do practically nothing right. For us, they can do almost no wrong. With [REDACTED] they have the comfort and confidence to keep trying.
- You can't legislate everything. I have a sacred responsibility to teach my son, but I lack the training. We all need teachers and therapists like Tonya Torres, who are committed to the children. You can help legislatively by providing the funds for more staff so that these professionals aren't so strung out between schools or between students that they can't be effective.
- The investment you make in the educators is a drop in the bucket compared to the long-term costs to taxpayers if children with Autism and other Special Needs diagnosis aren't successful at learning how to learn.

Madam Chair and Members,

My name is Sheila Cunningham. I am a voter, a taxpayer, a constituent of Sen. Ogden and the parent of a wonderful son who happens to have Autism. Thank you for the opportunity to share the experience my family has had in the Georgetown ISD system. I try to take advantage of every opportunity to praise those who have made a huge impact on my family and my son in particular. It gives me a chance to thank them for their dedication and love.

My son [REDACTED] was identified, by our pediatrician, at the age of 17 months as someone who needed additional help in catching up to his peers in language skills and physical dexterity. The Early Childhood Intervention staff in Bryan / College Station worked with [REDACTED] in the areas of speech and physical therapy. When we moved to Georgetown we were told that [REDACTED] would not qualify for services with ECPI if he were brand new in the system. We were encouraged. We assumed that [REDACTED] had caught up and no longer needed these government services.

While enrolled in a Mother's Day Out program, the teacher, a former public school teacher, approached me and said [REDACTED] wasn't interacting with the other children as expected and recommended that he be evaluated by the school system.

At age 3 ½, [REDACTED] qualified for the PPCD program in Georgetown then housed on only one campus, Annie Purl Elementary. We met our first marvelous Special Education teacher, Mrs. Sophie Coronado. She was patient with our son's hang-ups and habits as well as with our denial of any permanent condition. It was Mrs. Coronado who recommended that [REDACTED] be evaluated by the district diagnostician, Mrs. Cheryl Crawley. I filled out a questionnaire that was more like a book in length. Mrs. Coronado did the same and Mrs. Crawley observed and tested [REDACTED] as much as he would permit. Mrs. Crawley called my home and asked if she could come over to discuss the results of her findings in advance of our ARD meeting. She broke the news to us as gently as anyone could on a Sunday afternoon around our kitchen table, our son was Autistic, his specific diagnosis Pervasive Developmental Delay.

[REDACTED] learned to better communicate and decreased the frequency of his tantrums under the instruction and encouragement of Mrs. Coronado and later Mrs. Sara Packard, the second marvelous Special Education teacher to enter our lives. They used a number of techniques and tools like picture schedules, OT exercises and interaction with other children, some with disabilities some without.

Because our house was zoned for a different elementary school, [REDACTED] was transferred to Village Elementary for kindergarten. I knew little about the school and was apprehensive about uprooting him. Why mess with a good thing, I asked myself.

During Open House, I took [REDACTED] to meet his kindergarten teacher. To my dismay, [REDACTED] noticed and became very agitated that the letter "P" was missing from the teacher's foam letter collection. The teacher, a 20 year veteran with an excellent reputation, looked on wide-eyed and with dismay as my son melted down in an inconsolable fit and made her "meet and greet" evening one to remember. Lonna Adams, Content Mastery teacher and Special Education Superstar, came into the room and began the first "intervention" that would be repeated often over the next 6 years.

I would love to say that with Lonna's help we saw an immediate change in [REDACTED]. That his tantrums disappeared, that his lock-ups loosened, that everything was great. The truth is it has been a long, long road. I remember marking a good week by saying, "I didn't get any calls from the principal." I committed to partner with the educators to do my utmost to help them, help [REDACTED]. I volunteered: to offer [REDACTED] encouragement, to meet his classmates, and to get to know his teachers and aides.

Among other things, [REDACTED] struggled with his handwriting, not because of poor penmanship, but because of an over-developed sense of perfectionism. Lonna Adams sat with him for an hour and a half one afternoon trying to help him with handwriting homework. He would write and then erase because it wasn't good enough. I arrived at 3:00 and asked for permission to continue helping him in the same room. It took another hour and a half, but we did it, together.

Over the years, poor reading comprehension has been a near constant source of frustration for [REDACTED]. He has been able to "read" by recognizing letters and the sounds that they make since he was about three. His understanding of what he reads has lagged behind considerably. Lonna and I became aware of a new reading program just before the end of one school year. I purchased the curriculum and she tutored him for free all summer just to see if it would work and would be beneficial to other students at the school.

Thanks to the work of pioneering parents like many of these present today, the efforts of legislators like yourselves, and school administrators, [REDACTED] is educated with his peers as much as is beneficial. It takes more staff to make this possible especially in the early years. Because many of [REDACTED] classmates have been around him for several years and have been taught that [REDACTED] is a valuable member of the classroom like themselves, they have embraced him. Many seek him out to encourage him in an activity or console him when he's upset.

[REDACTED] most recent Individual Education Plan included goals like "Remain appropriately seated during classroom instruction", "Use 'ignoring' as the basic response to unwelcome stimulus", and "Deliver and accept greeting and apologies appropriately". I proposed a reward system to be used at school that utilized these IEP

goals and a few others in areas where he struggled. When [REDACTED] met his IEP goals he received a reward of his choosing. Lonna Adams went out and bought [REDACTED] the reward that he desired. A children's video to watch every time he reached his check chart quota. Together, we found a way to make the most of [REDACTED] Individual Education Plan.

My son has strong math skills. He passed his Math TAKS test with commended performance. Unfortunately, he failed his Reading and Science TAKS tests. We counted it a Success though because he persevered and completed the tests. That would not have happened, if Mrs. Adams had not taught him over the years how to skip a question when necessary, how to reason out an answer, basically how to take a test.

Not every year was great. Not every teacher "got" [REDACTED], but some years were stellar. I knew though that during those rough years, [REDACTED] had an advocate when I couldn't be present. Mrs. Adams was there to fill in the gaps, to ensure that [REDACTED] was receiving the accommodations he needed, to help him learn to cope, and to make sure my husband and I stayed informed.

It would be a shame if I didn't also tell you about the Special Ed. aides who were right there anytime [REDACTED] needed them. Andreana Marty tutored [REDACTED] weekly despite already having two full time jobs, Candy Hodge stood out in the heat or the cold because [REDACTED] had to get his running checkmark to earn that reward. Tina Bingham, made sure [REDACTED] had a cool down place when the classroom became too overwhelming and Norma Hernandez was there for [REDACTED] to put his shoulder on at lunch every day for years. Although, Mrs. Hernandez retired two years ago, she came back to the school last month to see [REDACTED] play the piano for his 5th grade class graduation.

Just before what was scheduled to be our last ARD meeting of Elementary School, I was apprehensive about the transition to Middle School. Even though I have attended these ARD meetings for the past 7 years, I didn't feel like I knew what to ask for in the way of accommodations or how to help [REDACTED] be successful as he made the leap to 6th grade. I prayed about it right before going in to the meeting.

Without knowing of my prayer, Lonna and the other special education staff volunteered to do a new complete evaluation for [REDACTED] even though it wasn't technically due until the following Fall. They reasoned that it would benefit [REDACTED] more if those who knew him well did the evaluation rather than teachers who had only seen him for a few months.

I know that not all parents of Special Needs students see teachers as I do or even see Village Elem. as I. I asked Mrs. Adams one day, why it worked so well for us when the system and the same teachers struggled to satisfy other parents. The answer surprised

me. With some other parents, the teachers could do nothing right. With us, the teachers could nearly do no wrong. It gave them comfort and confidence to keep trying to figure out how [REDACTED] learned best.

You can't legislate everything. I have a sacred responsibility to teach my son. Even if I were still a stay-at-home mom, however, I wouldn't know how best to teach him many things. I don't have that training. I need the help of these wonderful teachers and therapists, like Tonya Torres, who are committed to the children.

Quite honestly, you as legislators need these teachers and therapists, and more of them, as much as I do. Without the teachers and aides, in ratios that work, many of these children will be relying on benefits from the government for the rest of their lives. I don't want that for [REDACTED]. I want him to be a computer programmer, an actuary, a NASA engineer, a research scientist, or anything else that will allow him to be self-sufficient. The investment you make in the educators now is a drop in the bucket compared to the long-term costs if my son and the one in 100 children with Autism aren't successful at learning how to learn.

You can throw lots of money at great programs and curriculum, but without enough committed staff to make it work, it's still just paper.